

Survey of college students is encouraging

by Jack P. Calareso

It is not difficult to find negative stories about college students. Images and reports recount in graphic detail inappropriate behavior in the classroom and their lives. Stories about academic cheating, alcohol abuse and campus violence paint a picture of a student population marked by decadence and an absence of moral values.

But a report that has gotten too little attention provides a significantly different picture.

"Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose," was produced by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, one of the premier organizations studying postsecondary education.

The study involved 3,680 third-year students at 46 public and private, nonsectarian and religiously affiliated colleges and universities. Results indicated a high level of spiritual engagement and religious commitment.

Professor Alexander W. Astin, a distinguished researcher who has been studying college-student behavior for decades, directed the study, which asked students how they view themselves in terms of spirituality and related qualities or virtues, such as compassion, honesty, optimism and humility.

It also asked students how academic and career development is affected by such self-perceptions and what most gets in the way of spiritual/religious quests. Students also were queried about the connection between traditional religious practice and spiritual development.

The results provide a portrait of students who pray (77 percent), discuss religion/spirituality with their friends (78 percent), believe that their religion/spirituality helps develop their identity (73 percent), and helps them gain strength by trusting in a higher power (71 percent).

Large majorities of these students have laudable life goals of attaining wisdom (86 percent) and becoming a more loving person (84 percent). They value greatly compassion, kindness, helpfulness and generosity. These values are manifested in high levels of engagement in volunteer activities, learning programs and community outreach on campuses and in communities.

The study does not, however, paint a completely positive picture of the higher-education environment. An unfortunate finding is that more than half of the students reported that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life or religious/spiritual issues, despite their interest and the value of such discussions and learning opportunities.

Astin challenges higher education to educate the whole student, saying, "If we just teach students how to make money or become rich and famous we are not fulfilling our

responsibilities as educational institutions.”

According to Astin, who plans a follow-up study in the fall: “College students are very much engaged in spirituality and religion. Clearly, it is far more important to them than most people in higher education assume.”

Today’s college students for the most part are young men and women who have deep values, high moral character and a commitment to serving the common good. They often display some of the predictable behaviors and the inevitable growing pains of youth. But more often and consistently, they demonstrate their search for truth, their movement towards wisdom and maturity, their deeply held values and beliefs, and exemplify goodness, honesty, integrity and compassion in their lives of action and service to others.

Sadly, the same can not be said for all generations and all segments of society. One can only wonder what the results would be if such a survey was conducted with some of today’s business leaders and politicians. The current moral and ethical malaise in business, industry and public service may improve significantly as soon as today’s students graduate and take their place in our world.

*Jack P. Calareso is president of
Ohio Dominican University*